

THE NEW YORK TIMES
Friday, 18 November, 2005

Tracey Emin: I Can Feel Your Smile
Lehmann Maupin
540 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through Dec. 17

BY KEN JOHNSON

Tracey Emin's confessional, faux-urban folk art about her messy sex life oscillates between bad-girl cheek and emo-girl pathos. This affecting, low-key show by the former Y.B.A. - the appellation she shared with other provocative, once young British artists like Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst - plays up her vulnerable side, but it also makes a fierce feminist point. The main gallery presents a series of small drawings and embroidered and stitched fabric works - all mostly white - asserting declarations of love that look as if they were made by a distracted and narcissistic teenage girl. They say things like "I miss you," "I keep dreaming of you" and "Why did you make me stop loving you?" Elsewhere, similar words are layered over a brief, poetically blurry film of a dog lounging by the ocean.

In the center of the main gallery, by jarring contrast, stands a towering, phallic construction of old, broken boards with a straight white neon tube running through it from the floor to almost the ceiling. Titled "Salem," it evokes the idea of witch burning, and this sets up an archetypal tension between unbridled feminine desire and a murderously patriarchal and Puritanical social order. Whether you view this as all too realistic or as a melodramatic exaggeration may depend on where in the world you live.